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ABSTRACT

Characteristics of the Hmong refugees to the United States are described, with emphasis on educational problems. Historians agree that the Hmong lived in China until about 1810 when they began to migrate to Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. The evacuation of U.S. troops from Saigon in 1975 marked the beginning to the first wave of Southeast Asian refugees to the United States. Hmong immigrants have arrived in the United States in four waves, settling largely in California, Minneapolis-Saint Paul (Minnesota), and Providence (Rhode Island). School districts in these areas have only begun to cope with the problem of understanding and meeting the unusual needs of Hmong students as they adjust to American schools. Hmong children come from a culture that was tribal, essentially pre-literate, and pre-technological. The impact of the Hmong culture on behavior in U.S. schools is felt in the areas of: (1) cultural identity; (2) learning style; (3) oral, rather than written, tradition; (4) role models for males and the lack of educated role models for females; (5) early marriage; (6) high fertility rate; (7) tension for females between traditional roles and the desire for education; and (8) school dropouts. There is a great need for bicultural counselors for Hmong children because the norms of Hmong life are vastly different than the life they lead in American schools. There is a 49-item list of references. (SLD)

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HMONG

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An Introduction to the Hmong

By Wendy Walker, Ph.D.

Who are the Hmong? Living high in the chimney-steep mountains of northern Laos, the majority of the Hmong never saw technical or modern devices until the Indochina war. "Being situated in the mountains in remote, isolated villages ... few , if any, Hmong had any schooling" (Xeu Vang Vangyi, 1980). The home was the site of education for Hmong children, and everyone took part in teaching a child the practical and culturally correct ways of existence (Barney, 1957). The Hmong tradition is not literary, but oral. Missionaries created the first written Hmong language in the mid-1950s. Instead of writing, Hmong women embroidered their tales of history, entwined with their animistic beliefs, on large pieces of cloth called *pun dao.*

The oral tradition of the Hmong contains important clues regarding their origin as a distinct people. These tales, passed down during annual father-son rituals enacted at the time of the Hmong New Year, include one which speaks of the land of snow and ice "behind the back of China" where days and nights each lasted six months, and "the trees were rare and very small, and the people were clothed in furs. "(Mottin, p. 15, from Savina, 1930). Von Eickestedt argued that, based on geographical evidence, the Hmong came from the steppe region of Tibet, Mongolia and the core regions of China (from Cooper, p. 17).

Historians agree that the Hmong lived in China until around 1810, when they began to migrate southward into Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Today, as many as several million Miao, a derogatory name for the Hmong, still live in southwest China.

It is believed that harsh suppression was responsible for driving the Hmong into Laos, Thailand and Vietnam in the 18th and 19th centuries. Opium production may have been another factor in the Hmong exodus. In the 19th century the Hmong began exchanging opium, long used by them for medicinal purposes, for salt and other things they could not produce themselves. The opium wars of the 19th century may have helped drive many Hmong out of China.

The Hmong are a tribal people. Outsiders cannot understand the Hmong unless they recognize the importance of their tribal identity and what that identity means to the ordering of their daily lives. The Hmong social system gives fathers, husbands and older brothers the roles of providers and decision makers, leaving Hmong girls and women with little power in the family or in the wider society. The authority system is hierarchical and based on the family clan. Everyone with the same last name is assumed to be a member of the same clan. Important alliances between clans are formed through marriage (Thao, 1986). A bride becomes part of the husband's clan, losing her original clan identity. It is an incest taboo to marry within one's clan.

Thao (1986) points out that the clan is more than a surname, it is an identity and a safeguard for survival. The clan members refer to one another as "cousins" or "brothers." A fellow clan member can expect shelter and assistance from any other member of the clan, even if they have never known of one another before. The sense of security provided by the clan structure, "founded on a millenium of solidarity, has been able through the centuries to help the Hmong avoid juvenile delinquency, begging, and other social evils"(Yang Dao, 1985:4). An early Hmong settler in the United States claims that the Hmong are "likely not to believe in anyone except their clan leaders. When they decide to do something, only their clan leaders can convince or stop them from doing it" (Vangyi, 1980:12).

Their long struggle for survival provides the key to Hmong culture and identity. A minority almost everywhere they have lived, the Hmong have traditionally been at odds with existing powers. They have fought the Chinese, Lao, French, Vietnamese and Thais to defend their interests and their cultural and political identity. In Laos, between 1918 and 1920, the Hmong rebelled against the French, causing the French to appoint Hmong chiefs to rule Hmong areas (Cooper, p. 17). This policy eventually led to a split between pro- and anti-French Hmong factions.

THE EFFECTS OF WAR

Many Hmong are aware that the threat to their survival intensified during the 1960s and 1970s, when a majority of their men were lost fighting the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese, in support of American operations in Indochina. From 1967 to 1975, the last seven years of U.S. involvement in Indochina, 70 percent of new Hmong recruits were between 10 and 16 years of age (Mottin, 1980). In 1968, Edgar "Pop" Buell, an operative for the U.S. Special Forces in Laos, who supplied provisions from the Agency for International Development (A.I.D.) to the Hmong, reported to the New Yorker:

> A short time ago we rounded up 30 fresh recruits. 30% were 14 years or less, and 10 of them were only 10 years old. Another 30% were 15 or 16. The remaining 40%

> were 45 or older. Where are the ones in between? I'll tell you—they're all dead (McCoy, 1972:281).

By March 4, 1970, Buell reported to the Washington Post that the number of Hmong in Laos had dropped by about 100,000 because of war, hunger, massacres and disease.

A report to the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees in September 1970, estimated that 50% of the 400,000 Hmong population were killed by the war. B-52 bombers were diverted to Laos due to the bombing halt declared in Vietnam in November 1968. Approximately 230,000 tons of bombs were dropped in northern Laos in 1968 and 1969 (Cornell Air War Study, 1971, cited in Branfman, 1972:4 fn). An estimated 90 percent of the villagers in the north were affected by the bombing (Rickenbach, 1970).

By 1969, approximately 800,000 Hmong, ethnic Lao, and other hill tribes had been forced to leave their disease-free mountain villages and move into malaria-ridden areas further south. As the bombing intensified, these mountain people hid in the jungles where they existed on banana leaves, roots and tree bark. Most of their babies died as did many of the elders.

Most Hmong students in American schools do not remember the war or Laos. Many of them were born, and most grew up, in refugee camps in Thailand. Until they came to the United States, many of the refugee children had never known life outside of the camps. Indeed these children are a product of "camp culture," a term that "refers to that particular blend of influences—both modern and old work, local and global—that plays such a dominant role in the children's lives in refugee camps" (Moffat and Walker, 1986).

HMONG EDUCATION

The Hmong say that education came with the war. Around 1961, when the U.S. military began recruiting Hmong as fighters, A.I.D. contracted with the University of Hawaii to build primary schools and train teachers for the Hmong (Yang See, 1981). The language of instruction was Lao. Many of the schools were in the areas where the Hmong were relocated. A.I.D. and the Lao Ministry of Education established two high schools for Hmong in Sam Thong and Ban Nam Mo. A.I.D. also provided for a six-month teacher training program for Hmong who had graduated from primary school (Yang See, 1981). After completion of the course, the teachers returned to the new schools in remote villages.

Before 1964 only a few, wealthy Hmong attended the French high schools or the Ecole Superieure de Pedagogie in Vientiane, the capital. In 1973, 34 Hmong students were

studying at universities overseas, 25 of them in France (Mottin, 1980). Education of the the Hmong, like the positions of leadership, was reserved for men. Few Hmong girls were allowed to attend school in Laos before 1972

As of 1983, at the Hmong refugee camp in Thailand, Ban Vinai, the majority of the 6,000 primary school students were boys, with approximately 100 girls. The gender ratio improved dramatically for the youngest children. By 1986, there were approximately 8,000 primary students at Ban Vinai, and 63 percent of the children aged 7-14 were in school. By grade six, however, only 11% of the children were girls because most girls had dropped out. Few older girls take the correspondence courses and private courses offered around the camp.

Since 1985, all teen-age Hmong who have come to the United States have probably participated in the 20-week program called Preparation for American Secondary Schools (PASS) at the processing centers in Phanat Nikom, Thailand, or Bataan, the Philippines. This program provides a general introduction to the framework of American secondary schools, including schedules, lockers, gym and cafeteria eating. The course work provides survival English for a high school environment and an introduction to basic math skills. According to PASS graduates, the program helped them understand the way things were done in the United States, such as getting to school by bus or other modes of transportation, getting food in the cafeteria, following school rules, looking for numbers to find their classes, and keeping a notebook.

WAVES TO THE UNITED STATES

The evacuation of U.S. troops from Saigon in April 1975 marked the beginning of the first wave of Southeast Asian refugees to the United States. After the Hmong leader, General Vang Pao, fled to Thailand in 1975 to escape the Pathet Lao takeover of Laos, the United States accepted approximately 5,000 Hmong for resettlement. This first refugee wave, therefore, had strong connections to Vang Pao and the U.S. government. Xeu Vang Vangyi (1980) distinguished the Hmong who came in 1977 and 1978 as the second wave, and those who came in 1979-81, the majority of Hmong refugees, as the third wave. According to Vangyi, the first and second waves of Hmong had at least some education, but the third wave brought "the soldiers, the peasants, the farmers, and other working groups who had no formal education, no language training, no experience with Western societies."

From 1982 to 1986, the resettlement of Hmong refugees slowed to a trickle. The opportunity was open, but entire buses returned empty from the Hmong camp at the Laos border. According to the Hmong, General Vang Pao had asked them to wait five years

while he tried to get support for the Hmong army to re-enter Laos. That five-year period ended in 1986, and large numbers of Hmong have sought resettlement since.

I would argue that the Hmong arriving since 1986 constitute a fourth wave. The fourth wave brings loyalists, the diehards, those who were unwilling to give up hope of returning to Laos. They have been the most exposed to war and spent the longest time in refugee camps. The fourth wave may be similar to the second wave in that the adults may have been in relatively privileged positions in the past, such as village chief or second-tier military officers, but the education and exposure to technology of the younger generation will reflect the opportunities available in the camps where many were born or grew up. More of the children may have attended primary school than in previous waves. They have been internationalized by the camp experience (Moffat and Walker, 1987). The manner in which fourth wave refugees enter the United States, as well as their level of preparation, reflects both improvements in educational programs for refugees, and the winding down of funding for such programs.

In the United States, the impact of the Hmong is most obvious in California's Central Valley and San Diego, in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and in Providence, Rhode Island, where large concentrations of Hmong have settled. It is likely that future Hmong arrivals from refugee camps will also relocate in these areas because the Hmong have traditionally preferred to live with other Hmong clansmen for safety reasons. School districts in such areas have clearly only begun to cope with the problem of understanding and meeting the unusual needs of Hmong students as they adjust to American schools.

THE IMPACT OF HMONG CULTURE ON BEHAVIOR IN SCHOOLS

CULTURAL IDENTITY

All immigrant children bring into the classroom cultural scripts modeled on the material and social environment in which their parents lived. Hmong youngsters, coming from a culture that was essentially pre-literate and pre-technological, bring their own behavioral, attitudinal and emotional styles into the American classroom; these styles are very different from those that derive from middle-income, industrialized cultures. The norms of Hmong behavior still belong to a life very alien to that familiar in most American communities.

The traditional adaptability of the Hmong has often been overlooked by American researchers. While those who have studied the Hmong in the United States tend to view Hmong culture as static, the literature on the Hmong living in Thailand, Laos and China stresses its flexibility. Geddes (1976:72), writing about the Hmong who settled in

northern Thailand many decades ago, determined that "relationships are constantly being varied according to contemporary circumstances. In the migratory way of life the younger generations are the pioneers, and therefore the new relationships they make become the focal points of new alignments, convenience in the present being of greater importance in many cases than association in the past."

Flexibility may be the secret to the survival of the Hmong over thousands of years and thousands of miles. The Hmong have long experienced the tension of wanting to preserve their culture while adapting to the present, and have been quite skillful at balancing these needs. Hmong cultural role models have changed with the needs of their environment, from farmers to soldiers to scholars. Jonas Vangay, instructor of Hmong Culture for Title VII teachers in Merced County, California, noted that role models and cultural expectations of the Hmong have change several times within his own lifetime. They have adapted to conditions of isolation, war, displacement and life in an unfamiliar, industrial, consumer society—the United States. Their cultural expectations and role models have changed, but their identity as Hmong is constant.

Survival and group identity are strong, immutable characteristics of Hmong culture, and are often given priority over an individual's academic achievement. Teachers may therefore be disappointed to find that early academic success is not a guarantee of future commitment to education. In Merced, for example, first and second grade teachers found that Hmong girls in their classes were better students than Hmong boys, and expected the girls to continue to compete as aggressively as any other students. This, however, runs counter to the traditional cultural expectations Hmong children face at home. While the Hmong are very lenient with their younger children, and may allow those of elementary school age to play and compete, upon reaching puberty Hmong females are considered adults, old enough to marry and to have children. It may take several generations for Hmong culture to adapt to the later age of marriage and childbirth that is the pattern for their American-born counterparts.

Hmong ethnicity creates a number of problems for Hmong students within the academic structure. Sonsalla (1984), in his thesis research on Hmong high school students in St. Paul and Minneapolis, found that the home culture of Hmong students leads them to a different set of priorities from those of their American teachers. Sonsalla concluded that the highest priority of Hmong students was the preservation of their culture. This goal clashed with the highest priority of American teachers, which was to assimilate the Hmong as fast as possible.

The Hmong migratory lifestyle followed the dictates of animism and soil fertility until war came to Laos. As mentioned above, in the late 1960s the Hmong fled the mountains to live in the designated safe areas to escape bombs and to avoid the free-fire zones of

the Royal Lao Government and the Pathet Lao. While in the camps the Hmong, of necessity, abandoned their migratory habits. Once in the United States, the many Hmong again relocated frequently. However, such movements should not be interpreted as a continuation of the old migratory pattern: Hmong movements in this country are driven not by soil fertility or bombs, but by their quest for their dream of the future—land to farm, safety, and other Hmong. This is what a "future" means in the Hmong language. For many of the older Hmong, there is no future without these prerequisites.

Schools have long been the battleground of assimilation. Native Americans are still fighting for control over the education of their children who, in some cases, are still sent to government boarding schools. Eastern European Jews, Italians, Irish and early Chinese immigrants all struggled to preserve their religions and cultures. After bitter fights in New York and Boston, Irish and Italian Catholics set up parochial schools rather than have their children attend Protestant-dominated public schools. Similarly, the remarkable achievements of Jewish (Portes and Bach, 1985) and Chinese immigrants were facilitated by the schools and cultural centers that they established to preserve traditional values and ethnic identity.

LEARNING STYLE

One reason for the survival of the Hmong through thousands of years of change, from China to the United States, is the Hmong ethos of working together to remain Hmong. Hmong youth have been "socialized to a world view in which the group took precedence over the individual, and personal well-being was dependent on the health of the family or kin group" (Goldstein,1985:261). In the classroom, Hmong students of all ages will quietly tell fellow Hmong who are unable to answer a question the correct answer. They also help one another with their workbooks and answer sheets, at times in violation of school rules that are oriented toward individual (and competitive) achievement and testing.

The Hmong learning style may provide a rich resource for teachers interested in developing methods of cooperative learning. In Merced, I have seen teachers put Hmong girls or boys together at joint desks at the back of the room so that their constant discussion of their work will not bother other students. In her study of the learning of Hmong adults in Madison, Wisconsin, Hvitfeldt (1986:70) found that the cooperation, noncompetitiveness, and group support were "central to the Hmong students' interpretation of student role." Students denied any individual ability even when they were personally praised by the teacher.

> Individual students are continuously in touch with those around them, maintaining interpersonal interaction through verbal and nonverbal checking of

> each other's books, papers and worksheets. The weaker students look around for assurance; the stronger students maintain a constant check on the work of the weaker students in order to make certain that they are progressing correctly. Help is freely given and, even when not requested, accepted as a matter of course (Hvitfeldt,1986:70).

The learning style of Hmong children remains primarily "learning by doing" and learning by observation. This style of learning reflects the slash-and-burn farming style of the Hmong. Rather than planning for crop rotations, they observe the crops, the earth and the dry season to decide when to burn the overgrowth, or when to move on to new land. A textbook produced by the Center for Applied Linguistics which is used to teach U.S.-bound refugees in the Overseas Training Program in Thailand and the Philippines describes how the traditional Hmong life was patterned by this learning style:

> In a rural village, the rhythm of life is organized by the rising and setting of the sun and the planting and harvesting of crops. Everything needed is produced by hand. Young people watch and listen while cloth is woven, fields plowed and tools made. If they learn a second language they do so by working alongside people from other villages. For them there is no need for books. They learn by example. (Center for Applied Linguistics, 1984:2)

Learning by doing, and doing according to what they see needs to be done, leaves young Hmong without the experience of planning for college or a career. Indeed, specializing is un-Hmong. The Hmong are taught from childhood how to do and make everything they will need to survive.

Another problem lies in the measurement of academic achievement. Academic achievement is traditionally measured by the performance of the individual student in comparison to other students or subjective assessment by the teacher. Should the Hmong style of learning be assessed differently?

ORAL TRADITION

Niyekawa (1986) argues that children from non-industrialized societies begin school in the United States with "dual handicaps" because they have not been as exposed to written texts as Americans. Hmong, Mien, Khmu, Montagnards and other Southeast Asian hill tribes share oral backgrounds. They have had almost no exposure to written materials, and rarely, if ever, have had someone else read to them. These children may lag behind other students in the realization that written languages differ from spoken languages, and in their ability to decontextualize language (McLauglin, 1985).

Inadequate English, spoken and written, is regarded as the primary problem of Hmong students. Rumbaut and Ima (1987) found that Hmong averaged the lowest score of Indochinese groups tested in San Diego on reading comprehension, and only in the 23rd national percentile in all reading tests combined on the nationally standardized Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS). Yet, on math skills, the average Hmong ranked in the 66th national percentile, higher than Cambodians or Laotians.

Hmong acumen with numbers is not a surprise for those who have worked with the Hmong. In 1985, I was asked by the United High Commissioner for Refugees to conduct a nutrition study of children less than five years old at the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand. Ban Vinai is the camp for hill tribes from Laos and was the largest refugee camp in Thailand at that time. Given that Hmong women take primary care of children, I decided to hire Hmong women to assist me. Hmong men and foreign volunteers alike told me that Hmong women were too shy and did not have enough education to collect heights weights, and compute the percentages of malnutrition I needed. I found 12 Hmong teen-age women who required only minimal training with calculators to do an exemplary job. The assistants averaged less than two years of education.

The Rumbaut and Ima (1987) findings also indicate that the longer Hmong children are in the United States, the better they do on language and reading achievement tests. The younger the students, the better they do on math achievement tests. My findings of Hmong students in Providence, Rhode Island, and Merced, California, support Rumbaut and Ima's findings. Basically, the younger the students and the longer they are in the U.S. schools, the better they do academically.

In the San Diego study, children of Hmong with more education scored better in reading, language and math rankings on the CTBS standardized tests than children of parents with little or no education. However, 60% of the Hmong parents in the Rumbaut and Ima (II, 1987) study had no education at all, and 92% had fewer than six years of education. Similarly, children of working Hmong scored better on academic achievement tests than children whose parents were unemployed. Unfortunately, 81% of the Hmong parents in the Rumbaut and Ima study were unemployed.

The surprising finding in San Diego by Rumbaut and Ima (1987) was that 40 percent of Hmong students had grade point averages above 3.0, "outperforming majority white Americans as well as Filipinos, Hispanics and Blacks. " The Hmong also had the smallest percentage of students with grade point averages below 2.0 of any group in the city. Even without including English as a Second Language, the Hmong still did well in their grade point averages. Why, then, are so few Hmong attending and graduating from college? Unfortunately, there are no data available on the tracking levels of the Hmong,

and this is essential to a full explanation of Hmong academic performance. The Hmong are doing as well as they can in the levels they are in. It shows us that the Hmong have the potential to do well in college preparation levels of classes. The findings of the Rumbaut and Ima (1987) study also suggest that San Diego is doing an excellent job in educating Hmong students.

It is important to note that the Hmong have had less education and are poorer than other Asian immigrant and refugee groups (Walker,1987). The Rumbaut and Weeks (1986) study found that 94 percent of the Hmong lived below the poverty level in San Diego. The majority of other Asian refugee groups—Cambodians, lowland Lao and Chinese-Vietnamese—also lived below the poverty line. By comparison, less than one-sixth of non-refugee Asian immigrant groups live in poverty.

ROLE MODELS

Education has played a primary role in reshaping the attitudes of the generation of Hmong children who have grown up in the camps and in the United States. The Hmong in school in the United States today are the groundbreakers for the majority. They will inform those who come after them, but as the first to enter the systems, they have few role models. For young Hmong men, the role models began changing from soldiers to scholars in the early 1970s, according to Jonas Vangay, when some Hmong returned to their families from schools in Vientiane and France. Also, as the Hmong came down to the lowlands from the mountains and began to realize that they had been involved in a war of technology between superpowers that they did not understand, they began to regard education as their "handle on the future." In the United States, however, in the absence of many role models, there are few Hmong college graduates.

Until recently, for many young Hmong men, the principal motivation for graduating from high school was provided by the hope of taking their new knowledge back to Laos. Retaking Laos was regarded as necessary for Hmong survival (Strouse,1985; Stein 1979 as cited in Goldstein, 1985; Thomson, 1983). Today, the dream of retaking Laos is dying, but education continues to be valued.

There are no educated Hmong women to act as role models. The role models for teen-age Hmong women are married and producing families. Even today, Hmong women in Ban Vinai refugee camp who continue to study past puberty are unusual. The mother of one young woman student supports her by saying that she never had the chance to study and that she does not want her daughter to be ignorant. Another girl is an orphan and, therefore, is not subject to the same family pressure and expectations as her peers (Moffat and Walker, 1986).

There is no such thing as adolescence for most rural Southeast Asian youth. Goldstein (1985:106) found that:

> By Hmong standards, teens are adults with full adult responsibilities to family and community. Although senior adults support school attendance for their teen-agers, they simultaneously expect them to assume communal, adult responsibilities. The definition of these responsibilities derives from the senior adults' understanding of what it means to be Hmong and what conditions they believe are necessary to maintain the type of Hmong community that will ensure the survival of the Hmong.

MARRIAGE

Hmong culture pressures girls to marry young because Hmong males do not become full adults unless they are married (Goldstein,1985). Unless they are full adults, Hmong males cannot assume their roles in the hierarchy of Hmong leadership. Young girls are preferred as marriage partners because of the number of children they will be able to bear. Hmong girls marry younger, on average, than any other Southeast Asian refugee group, generally between the ages of 13 and 18 (Kunstadteder,1983; 1984; Vang,1983 from Rumbaut and Weeks,1986). Hmong men tend to marry later, generally between the ages of 18 and 25.

Polygamy and other Hmong marriage customs have changed dramatically in recent years. Polygamy is still practiced by some Hmong in the camps, usually the chiefs. In the Hmong tradition, a widow automatically becomes the wife, and thus the responsibility, of her husband's brother. This tradition changed in the Ban Vinai camp, largely because women were the primary income earners with their export quilt industry. The widows' cooperative is made up of women who refused to marry their husbands' brothers. Years of unemployment, also, have increased the participation of many Hmong men in household chores and child care.

Meredith and Rowe (1986:128) found in their survey of all Hmong in Omaha, Nebraska, that 83 percent agreed that "a good wife should do what her husband tells her to do." The wife is expected to stay close to the home, and care for the husband, children and house. I have seen no indication in my visits to Hmong homes around the country that acculturation is placing additional strain on traditional marriages. In the quiet way of Hmong women, there are smiles and curiosity about "equal" partnership marriages, but men remain the decisionmakers. However, in cases where a daughter or wife is more educated than the men in the family, her opinion is very important in decisions.

FERTILITY IN HMONG SOCIETY

Childbearing is seen as the main reason for marriage. The Hmong believe that the reason man and woman were created was to produce offspring, and "a good Hmong wife is a woman who gives birth to many sons and knows how to work hard and grow a lot of food" (Goldstein, 1985:77). To be Hmong is to have children, and to have children is to reconstitute the Hmong so that they can retake Laos, or at the very least, protect themselves.

In the camps, Hmong children are expected to have as many children as possible, as soon as possible, to replace the vast number of children who died during the years of living in the jungles and in the escape across the Mekong River. There is also an explicit desire to increase the size of the Hmong army. A newborn is introduced in the camps as a "soldier" or a "nurse." Consequently, although family planning methods are available in the camp, they are rarely practiced.

The high fertility rate of the Hmong is consistent, from China to Laos, to Thailand and the refugee camps, to the United States. According to Kunstadter (1984:24), the Hmong who settled in villages of northern Thailand many years ago are "at the upper limits of human reproductive capacity." Rumbaut and Weeks (1986) found that Hmong women between the ages of 20 and 24 in San Diego had an average of 2.5 children, higher than any other ethnic group. Less than a year later, a follow-up study found that 22 percent of the Hmong had given birth again, and 16 percent of the Hmong women were pregnant; 41 percent of the Hmong women said they planned to have more children.

Whereas the correlation between ethnicity and fertility is low or negative for the lowland Lao, Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Chinese-Vietnamese, it is very high for the Hmong. Being Hmong was such a strong predictor of high feritility amongst Southeast Asian refugees that Rumbaut and Weeks (1986) concluded that it seems that the usual downward influences on fertility, such as education, exposure to the modern world of the United States, and work, will not affect the Hmong, at least in the foreseeable future.

In their study of fertility among Indochinese refugees in the United States, Rumbaut and Weeks state (1986:446):

> The current pace of childbearing among the Hmong, especially, is almost unbelievably high, and were it to continue it would equal the level of the Hutterites—acknowledged to be the world's most fertile group.

To date, there has been no study on the fertility of Hmong women younger than 20 years old. Rumbaut and Weeks (1986) extrapolated this information from their data.

There is a need for educators to be aware of the rate of childbearing among Hmong girls ages 13 to 20.

TENSION IN ROLES

Hmong girls are caught between the drive to have as many children as possible and the desire to succeed academically. Remarkably, many have found it possible to do both.

At Boulder High School in Colorado, there is a house near the high school that allows girls flexibility in child care and as pregnant teens. I met one recent high school graduate who had three children and had worked full-time while attending school through this program. She hopes to go to college and become a teacher. The problem with the Boulder program and others like it is that the academic workload is geared to the lowest level. Bright Hmong girls who hope to attend college receive little challenge in such programs.

Goldstein argued that the Hmong give priority to domestic chores over the education of girls and that there is cultural support for a girl to leave school in order to fulfill her duties at home. My research suggests that the Hmong want their wives and daughters to attend school, but they are concerned about the safety of school buses and want to ensure that the mother can take proper care of her infants. Strouse (1985:125), in her survey of Hmong adults in Dane County, Wisconsin, found that many of the women who dropped out of school "claimed to have dropped out because they were pregnant or had child care responsibilities." In other cases, pregnant Hmong girls go to adult education classes where there is day care and they can work toward a general equivalency diploma.

One difficulty in addressing this issue is that many schools are not equipped to provide family planning to elementary and middle school students. In Oregon, Cohn (1986:198) found: "In many of the schools Hmong attend, sex education or birth control information is not taught until the junior or senior year of high school, by which time many Hmong girls have already dropped out, married, and given birth to one or two children."

DROPOUTS

In her thesis research on two high schools in Minnesota, Goldstein (1985) found that the ratio of Hmong high school students in both schools was approximately one female to three males. I have also found that the ratio of Hmong girls to boys in Merced County schools is approximately equal until junior high school, then it drops to about three Hmong boys to every two girls. Yet, in Merced, like Providence, San Diego and Seattle, high school records (grades 10-12) show no evidence of a dropout problem among

Hmong girls. I do not have the data to explain what happens to Hmong girls, but I suspect that those who drop out do so before the 10th grade, during the summer between junior high and high school, or when families move. I also suspect that a number of Hmong girls attend adult education courses, remain in newcomer programs, take home study, or transfer to teen parenting programs where available, rather than remain in mainstream classes. Furthermore, many who opt out altogether might often be regarded as "no-shows, " whose files are dispensed with after a certain period of time, rather than as dropouts. It is likely that most Hmong girls who do continue into the 10th grade without being married or pregnant do, in fact, graduate.

Goldstein (1985:67) finds that "few girls aged 16-21 chose to attend school," and "only the few girls who were not already married enrolled in the high school." The rest, all of whom were married, "chose to attend the technical college." Goldstein, however, offers no evidence that these academic decisions are, in fact, "choices." Once married, the husband usually makes decisions for the wife, including whether or not she will attend school. Nor does Goldstein explain how attending technical college differs from attending high school. Does the technical college provide day care? Are the hours more flexible for a wife and mother? Again, the decision to enroll in technical college may reflect the husband's preference for these benefits.

THE NEED FOR BICULTURAL COUNSELORS

Hmong children are tremendously dependent on the school system for academic guidance because the parents of these children have had little or no exposure to formal education, and are not literate in any language. Hmong parents regard the education of their children as a "handle on the future," (Moffat and Walker, 1985), but they themselves have no experience with American education. Goldstein (1985) saw the dilemma of the Hmong parents as wanting to help their children, but not knowing how. Goldstein (1985) found that parents were embarrassed to go to the schools, and had never had personal conferences with any of the teachers. Hmong students identified the need for their parents to be educated about the American school system.

According to a study in Fresno, California, home to 18,000 Hmong, a primary worry of the Hmong community leaders is the intergenerational problem. Refugee Reports (4/17/87) was told by a Hmong man who came in the first wave of Hmong refugees that "the elders have lost hope and the children are adapting so fast.... Parents see their children lost in a world of entertainment, rather than education, and they don't know what to do." In Fresno, domestic violence in Hmong families increased as parents tried to assert their traditional authority.

Strouse (1985) found that Hmong parents misunderstood what happens in school. Forty

Hmong adults in Dane County, Wisconsin, all answered in the affirmative when asked the question, "Are the schools teaching things you feel are important for your children to know?" The parents, however, believed their children were being taught to speak English and how to get a job. As Strouse observes, "It is not clear...that the Hmong understand exactly what the public schools are trying to do."

In light of the increasing tensions between the world of the Hmong community and that of the American teenager, the need for bicultural guidance becomes obvious. Hmong youth in Oregon often told Cohn (1986) that they needed counseling in school. Similarly, Goldstein (1985) found that Hmong students have no one to direct or counsel them. One Hmong girl in high school said, "Nobody can help yourself to decision. You have to help yourself everything" (Goldstein, 1985:265)

Cohn (1986) and Strouse (1985) also found a special need for career counseling because the idea of choosing a career is new to the Hmong. The Hmong language has no future tense (Strouse, 1985; Goldstein, 1985). Therefore, planning for a hypothetical future is "un-Hmong." Coming from a traditionally self-sufficient culture, the Hmong are not familiar with the idea of highly specialized fields.

CONCLUSION

All immigrant children bring into the classroom cultural scripts for roles modeled on the material and social environment of their previous lives. The literature on Hmong ethnicity shows that the norms of Hmong behavior are part of a life vastly different from the life they step into in American communities and American schools. To be successful they must integrate the old scripts with the new.

Very few Hmong came from urban or literate backgrounds. The work of Niyekawa (1986) and Rumbaut and Ima (1987) suggests that we can assume that the lack of familiarity with formal education or written language handicaps Hmong students. We also know that there are some individuals in all ethnic groups who excel beyond the average.

Being Hmong supersedes all other concerns for the Hmong. Because of their tribal identity, they are not open to the same level of intellectual commerce with the world at large as are those urban immigrant groups who already have been exposed to international trends, news and business. Hmong youngsters bring their cultural identity into the classroom in ways different from, and to a greater extent than, members of literate Asian cultures. If educators understood this, they could begin to address specific Hmong vulnerabilities inside the school.

As long as the survival of the Hmong is the highest priority of the Hmong culture—and there is no evidence in any of the literature that this priority is changing—the implications for school are severe. If Hmong are to succeed in school, teachers, administrators and counselors need to know who the Hmong are, and have some real understanding of the Hmong culture. Without this awareness they will not be able to provide equal access to the school curricula.

It seems unfair, at the present time, to measure Hmong academic success by standardized test scores, grade point averages in honor programs, and entry into elite colleges. A better indicator of the academic achievements of Hmong students might be the percentage of girls that graduate from high school, and the total number of Hmong who attend and graduate from college. The high grade point averages that Hmong showed in San Diego suggests that Hmong students are doing as well as they can in the class levels into which they have been placed. This indicates that it is time to move at least some Hmong students into higher levels of classes.

Education is the critical variable in the changing role of Hmong girls and women. We know that Hmong ethnicity is so strong a predictor of fertility that Rumbaut and Weeks (1986) do not expect education or the technological American lifestyle to reduce the high level of Hmong fertility in the near future. With Hmong girls continuing to have children soon after puberty, their dropout rate is likely to remain high, unless they are provided with teen parenting programs which enable them to remain in junior high and high school while pregnant, and to bring their children to school.

Torn between two cultures, Hmong youngsters may adapt to the individualism of American teen culture, or retain their Hmong identity. Because the group identity of the Hmong culture is directly opposed to the individualism stressed in American schools, it would seem that the faster they assimilate, the less Hmong they will be. If so, there may be no more Hmong in 50 years, as predicted by the grandfather of the Shaman at Ban Vinai refugee camp. Alternatively, the flexibility of this ancient culture may, as Geddes (1976) suggests, allow the younger generation to lead the Hmong into another era as Hmong-Americans.

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